

November 1991

## Conspectus

Claire-lise Benaud  
*University of New Mexico*

Sever Bordeianu  
*University of New Mexico*

John Ryland  
*Oglethorpe University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Benaud, Claire-lise; Bordeianu, Sever; and Ryland, John (1991) "Conspectus," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 3: Iss. 5, Article 15.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1116>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

# The Conspectus

*There is a growing interest in the Conspectus by all kinds of libraries.  
Here are two perspectives. Any more out there?*

## The Conspectus: A Useful Tool?

by **Claire-lise Benaud**  
(University of New Mexico)  
and **Sever Bordeianu**  
(University of New Mexico)

**L**ibraries are governed by mission statements. These statements harmonize the needs of a particular library's primary clientele with the services the library provides and the collections the library builds. Mission statements will vary according to type and size of library. The mission statement, together with the library's goals and objectives create a set of criteria against which services and collections can be evaluated. Specific tools are available to measure and compare library collections. This article will focus on a standard collection evaluation tool, the RLG Conspectus. The authors, librarians at the University of New Mexico General Library, have participated in the evaluation of the French collection using the Conspectus.

The Conspectus was designed in the late 1970s by the original Research Libraries Group as a tool to help determine the depth of their collections. Given the realization that no one library can collect all materials in all subjects, the Conspectus would indicate the areas of strength of each library's collection. The Conspectus uses more than 7,000 ranges of Library of Congress classification numbers divided and subdivided into categories and descriptors which provide detailed subject breakdowns for analysis. In each LC call number range, a library can assign a value ranging from 0 to 5. The values have the following meanings indicating the level at which the collection is developed:

- 0, out of scope;
- 1, minimal;
- 2, basic information;
- 3, instructional support;
- 4, research;
- 5, comprehensive

In addition, four language codes are added:

E, mostly English language materials; F, selected foreign materials; W, wide se-

lection of foreign materials; Y, materials mainly in one foreign language.

The conspectus worksheets also provide the opportunity to show historical changes in collection levels by having two additional subdivisions:

ECS, existing collection strength; CCI, current collecting intensity.

By filling out the Conspectus worksheets a library creates a matrix of collection strength indicators, both historical and current.

The Conspectus was adopted by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) as the collection evaluation tool in its North American Collection Inventory Project (NCIP). NCIP is an attempt by ARL to survey the collections of North American libraries and establish collection strengths in the major research libraries. One of the presumed outcomes would be that esoteric areas would be identified. These areas, which are in danger of being neglected, would be developed by at least one institution on the continent.

ARL's work with the Conspectus started in 1981. After initial pilot projects which proved that the Conspectus was a feasible tool for the NCIP study, ARL developed training manuals, created a conspectus distribution center, and trained fifteen consultants who could teach the method to interested libraries. Two important refinements to the Conspectus, supplementary guidelines and verification studies, were developed during this

period. By 1988, after several other developmental stages, the project reached full-scale implementation.

In 1989, The University of New Mexico began its participation in NCIP. The French selector, along with other humanities selectors, was trained for a full day by an NCIP trainer. She had read about the Conspectus but had not worked with it in a real life situation. With the Conspectus in hand, she had half a day to go to the stacks, evaluate the collection, and assign a level (0-5) to each subject field. To assess a collection in half a day proved rather difficult.

She had naively hoped that she could get a good grasp of the collection in that short a time. After checking the shelflist and other tools (guidelines and verification study), her uneasiness was not relieved. It became apparent that the Conspectus was not a tool to be used only once during a short training session. Rather than attempting to evaluate the whole French collection in a day or two, the selector found out that working with the Conspectus required an important time commitment which she did not have at that time. Selection is only a small part of this librarian's job. She did not forget about the Conspectus but it is buried in the left drawer of her desk due to other pressing commitments. As a result, the Conspectus did not prove as useful a tool as it could have been. This selector still intends to go back to the stacks, Conspectus in hand.

---

## RLG Conspectus For College Libraries? Bah, Humbug! by John Ryland (Oglethorpe University)

**H**aving been asked to write about the use of the RLG Conspectus, I replied bah, humbug! The shocked reply to my remark was a plea to write just that. The following attempt at an essay is a non-scholarly explanation of my position.

The use of the conspectus in RLG libraries is probably not appropriate

and its use in college libraries is absurd. The conspectus assumes that books are like soap boxes; if we plan to stock our shelves, we should have so many boxes of brand x, y, z and so forth. If we are to be truly sophisticated, we should have certain numbers of exotic soaps as well. We can then categorize our "store" as a mom and pop store. The problem with this is that our books and periodicals are individual items and our clientele are all individuals, some of whom are intelligent and many of whom have power.



In a small college library the role of individuals becomes even greater. The librarian knows the clientele and knows that his clientele changes rapidly. One college librarian told me that her library only collected the authors in English literature that were taught. I have great difficulty in believing that a good teacher will teach exactly the same authors each year. I also have difficulty in believing that these professors are always the same ones each year. Sabbaticals, illness, and sudden jumps of enrollment do occur. When I worked in large universities, these changes played no great role, because the universality and size of the collection was great enough to take care of the problem. In a small college the sabbatical plays havoc with plans. Planning for the collection requires the librarian always to expect change and to be prepared to deal with that change.

A major element of the conspectus involves the designation of collections by a code to show collecting intensity. This may make some sense for a college collection, since the conspectus would read as a series of 3a's and 3b's. This makes for dull reading. A college collection may have its highs and lows in collection intensity, but the variance is not great among the arts and sciences. Trying to restrict the Latin American collection to Argentina and Brazil makes no sense when there are 25 students in the Latin American history class and 25 in the economic development class, all wanting to write their term papers on different countries. One can expect that the number of subjects covered by term papers will exceed anyone's imagination. A detailed plan will not work at term paper time.

A major problem with the conspectus is that it does not differentiate in terms of focus. An example is in sociology. Our regular sociology professors prefer to read sociology books that are philosophical in nature and are not results of survey research. I take this into consideration when purchasing books and journals in that field. Nowhere in the conspectus is that issue addressed. Our collection is more philosophically oriented than are other college libraries. When part time instructors happen to teach, their

students are sent to the library for books that we would normally not buy. My dilemma is obvious. This problem is of no consequence in a large library that collects all forms of sociology books, but is of great importance in a small library with a correspondingly small budget. The conspectus provides no help for this real situation, as I expect it offers no help in any situation.

The conspectus is set up according to an analysis of the Library of Congress Classification System. Of course, the LC classification makes little sense. It is much easier to write on a piece of paper that we have great interest in things Chinese and Japanese than to try to isolate all the different areas of the classification in which the books may happen to fall. It also takes less time.

It is this great consumption of time by the conspectus that is so damning. College librarians do not have huge amounts of time to waste either doing work on a conspectus, going to meetings, or writing articles. Since we are dealing with real people, real books, and real needs, we have to work on solving the real problems created. I suspect that to be also true in larger libraries. If we spent our time discovering the real needs of our clientele and fulfilling these needs at a price we could afford, we would be doing a better job for those who pay our salaries.

This diatribe against the conspectus does not mean that I feel that time planning and organizing the collection is not worthwhile. I feel that regular evaluations of the collection are worthwhile. This is also true for statistical analyses. I can tell what time of day the collection circulates, what kinds of books circulate, and what kinds of books are used in the library. The needs of a college library are like a moving target and adjustments have to be made continually to hit that target. This adjustment means checking what types of books the faculty is reading (a simple matter with a good circulation

system), what their new interests are (their interests tend to change each year), and what the students are reading. In this way, the target may be hit.

Interesting discoveries may be found by this process. I have found that students do not want general books on a subject; they want specific books on a subject. This flies in the face of the conspectus with its indications of collection levels that make no sense at the small college. Their needs also can be met by various

amounts of purchasing at different periods. For example, one can predict that freshmen or education students will always be interested in topics such as child abuse, abortion, or divorce. How many titles do you need on these topics, though? It may suffice to buy ten one year, buy only the few major works the next few years, then buy a new batch of recent titles and throw out the old ones. How is that to be shown on a conspectus? In art, a library better have more titles than it can afford, since the students are voracious in their consumption of art books. When asked why they want twenty books on Rembrandt, they reply that they are always searching for specific paintings to prove their thesis. Other examples of discoveries that cannot be reduced to 3a or 3b is that education students like to read textbooks and business students need information more than books. It might be possible to write this down in an incredibly detailed conspectus, but since it all may change next year, why bother?

I have always felt that our predecessors did a better job of librarianship. They had acquisition plans instead of conspecti and they knew books, the book trade and had better educations. They also wanted to be librarians, not faculty, and knew their collections. Perhaps we should have more of the great retired librarians teach in our library schools, instead of PhD's in librarianship. ☛

